

Yün Chou to Ta-li Fu

145

000road to Ta-li Fu we climbed up to 8,300 feet, where on top of the range is a nice open country covered with fern and patches of tree jungle, an ideal place to find pheasants in if we had had time to go after them. There is no doubt game in this country, for while descending the forest-clad slopes on the other side, first a wild pig crossed the road, and soon afterwards two silver pheasants. We failed to get a shot at either.

On the 17th February we reached the Mekong at Hsi-ch'ang ferry. The river is here 100 yards wide, with a strong current running over a rocky and sandy bed which it fills. Its height is 3,250 feet, and though there is no flat ground, the river is rather less shut in by steep hills than in most places—a lucky circumstance as it is in this part of its course that the railway must run along it for some distance.

We were taken over by two large boats, each capable of holding eight mules. It is considered dangerous to swim animals across here, as the river is full of eddies and undercurrents. After crossing we climbed 2000 feet to the village of A-lo-kai. We were now in a very rough country, and our road up the Mekong valley the next day was so narrow that two of our mules had bad falls down the hillside. A nervous mule when he sees a narrow place will often try to rush past it, and if his load catches a bit of projecting rock he is naturally thrown right off the road. It is wonderful how seldom they are hurt. I have seen a mule roll down a hillside for 200 yards or more and begin quietly grazing when he gets to the bottom. Probably their loads save them a good deal.

In this case the only damage done was the thorough soaking in a small stream of the whole of the effects of Ker's interpreter, much to that individual's indignation and to the amusement of the rest of our Chinamen. His damaged belongings included a lot of cigars which he had brought from Mandalay and which naturally could not be replaced in Yün-nan.

276 The Chinaman in his natural state smokes nothing but a pipe, which always has a stem of enormous length and a bowl which only holds enough tobacco for a few whiffs. He is therefore continually employed in relighting his pipe.

- 276 and for this purpose keeps in his house a taper constantly smouldering. To blow this taper into a flame is quite an art. It requires a short quick puff, stopping very suddenly, and the European unused to such a thing finds considerable difficulty in managing it.

000 We camped at Hsiao-ch'in, which lies near the mouth of the side valley which we wished to explore. Here at last I found P'u-mans who knew their own language, and I took down a vocabulary from them¹. It resembles the La and Wa languages, and I have little doubt that they are connected with these tribes, especially as they here call themselves Wa-la. P'u-man is only a name given to them by Shans and Chinamen.

Leaving our camp standing at Hsiao-ch'in, we started the next morning to explore the side valley which runs down from the high range to the east. In a few miles the view of the steep hills at the top of the range convinced us that this was no good for a railway, and that the route Watts-Jones had surveyed up the Kung-lang valley was the only likely way to get up out of the Mekong.

779 Our day was not, however, without interest, as we discovered that there are a good many Panthay villages in this out-of-the-way spot. On our way back we went in and had tea with the head-man of one of these. He told us that they had lived here for 16 or 17 generations, so if that is true they may be the descendants of some of Kublai Khan's soldiers. I asked them if they had korans in Arabic, and they at once produced one. The head-man said he could read it, but did not seem very anxious to give us a specimen of his Arabic scholarship. We thought it more polite not to press him, as he would have found it rather difficult to "save his face," if it turned out that he could not read a word.

000 We slept at Hsiao-ch'in again, and in the middle of the night were waked up by loud yells. It appears that one of the mule men had heard someone moving about on the hillside, and that when he shouted to know who it was, the man ran away. No doubt he was looking about to see what he could pick up, but he had not succeeded, as

¹ See vocabularies in pocket of cover.